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ABSTRACT

According to researchers Herriott and Gross in their book "The Dynamics of Planned Educational Change," educational innovations fail because administrators (1) fail to diagnose problems correctly, (2) fail to anticipate and resolve implementation problems, (3) adopt an "ad hoc" approach to educational innovation, (4) accept uncritically widely publicized innovations, (5) do not use monitoring and feedback mechanisms, (6) fail to develop adequate plans emphasizing short term and long term goals, and (7) do not provide necessary leadership. These administrative shortcomings have a particular impact on innovations in writing instruction. However, the National Writing Project has avoided these failings because it is teacher centered. Thanks in part to this project, teachers are now teaching writing in a way that gives the composing process a chance to work. This positive momentum can be maintained by learning from the lessons of the educational innovations that have failed. Goals based on those lessons include cooperative leadership from principals and supervisors, careful diagnosis of problems in writing, a long term plan for writing improvement, staff development, and active involvement of all teachers. Such goals will eliminate educational faddism and dogmatism by emphasizing the tacit knowledge of experienced teachers. But these goals also require that all faculty work together, and that writing teachers continually renew their personal and spiritual resources. (HOD)

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MAINTAINING MOMENTUM: ENSURING THAT THE CONCERN FOR WRITING IS NOT ONE MORE EDUCATIONAL FAD

If you're an English teacher or supervisor, it's difficult these days to avoid a consultant trying to tell you how to teach writing, a professor explaining why grammar doesn't help, or a textbook salesperson selling a book to solve your writing problems. We are in the throes of one more fad, I'm afraid.

Sometimes I'm tempted to describe the current interest in writing as a religion, instead of a fad. There's a high priest, Saint James Moffett. There's a sacred ritual of combining sentences and holding peerfeedback sessions. There's an established church, the National Writing Project. There are magic words to utter: pre-writing, revising, holistic scoring. And there are commandments to observe: thou shalt not teach the topic sentence; thou shalt not correct their spelling.

But whether describing it as a fad or a religion, many of us are troubled by the same concern. We want to make a pervasive, lasting improvement and avoid the dangers of faddism and dogmatism. I would like in this paper to suggest what we can do to achieve this goal. Rather than simply offering a list of subjective admonitions, I would like to view the current interest in the teaching of writing against a general background of the research on educational change. Here I find most useful a recent work by Herriott and Gross (1979) The Dynamics of Planned Educational Change. After reviewing several decades of research on why innovations fail, they were able to identify

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eight general factors that seemed instrumental in that failure. I would like to use those eight factors in examining current developments in the teaching of writing, intending in that fashion to suggest how we might avoid the mistakes of the past.

The first factor leading to the failure of educational change, according to Herriott and Gross, is that administrators do not diagnose the problem correctly. Obviously we have often been guilty here in our efforts to improve the teaching of writing. In too many cases we have not diagnosed sufficiently, instead jumping to the conclusion that the English teacher is the cause of the writing problem. We do not have sufficient data yet on these diagnostic questions: how strong is the influence of the peer group? what part do parent attitudes and home environment play? how does television viewing impact on writing ability? how does the lack of writing in other school subjects affect writing achievement? to what extent do writing problems result from poor reasoning skills? We need to diagnose the writing problem more carefully instead of assuming that the English teacher is responsible.

The second factor that Herriott and Gross identify is the failure to anticipate and resolve implementation problems. In numerous school districts that have implemented new writing programs, I have observed four recurring implementation problems. There was not enough systematic inservice work with the teachers; typically, the staff development amounted to only one or two sessions in which a consultant sloganeered about the importance of writing. We know from research and our own experience that effective staff development needs to be on-going, teacher-centered, problem-oriented, and activity based. A second implementation mistake was the administrator's insensitivity to what sociologists

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call "role-overload." Since English teachers are already too busy , implementing a new writing program can create enervating demands that become dysfunctional. Also, too often funds were not provided for the new materials that were needed; administrators in effect seemed to be saying, "Implement a more effective writing program, but don't count on getting the texts and other instructional materials you need." A final implementation problem was the absence of strong administrative support during later phases of the program. A new writing program was announced with great fanfare, and the principal made sincere speeches about the importance of writing. Then after the first year passed, other problems seemed more pressing, and the writing program was forgotten.

The third general factor to which Herriott and Gross call attention in their study of educational change is an "ad hoc" approach to educational innovation. In our terms, that means that often a new writing program is introduced without sufficient attention either to the rest of the English curriculum--or to writing in other parts of the school's curriculum. Let me speak in greater detail about the first problem. In too many cases a new writing program is introduced piecemeal into the English curriculum, without a careful examination of its impact on the rest of that curriculum. Three problems result. First, the teacher justifiably feels that unrealistic demands are being made in adding more content to an already over-loaded curriculum. Classroom time is finite--and increasing the emphasis on writing means that something else must be de-emphasized. Second, ad hoc implementation can cause writing to be divorced from the rest of the English program, so valuable opportunities for integrating writing into the study of language, the study of literature, the analysis of the mass media are neglected. Finally, the piecemeal approach can result in an imbalanced English program. Teachers excited

about the possibilities of teaching writing and concerned about their responsibility for improving writing may neglect other aspects of the curriculum which are just as important.

A fourth factor in the Herrriott and Gross research is the uncritical acceptance of widely publicized innovations. Here I think we have been especially at fault. First, we have uncritically endorsed sentence combining as the panacea for all stylistic ills. Now I know that it is important to write mature sentences and that sentence combining can help students write sentences packed with subordinate elements. But I would remind you that sentence effectiveness is more than a matter of writing long, convoluted sentences replete with subordinate clauses. Sentence effectiveness depends on the communication context--the purpose, the audience, the medium. What is the most effective kind of sentence for writing directions for an uninformed audience? The answer is obvious: short, simple sentences that begin with the subject followed by the predicate. Over-emphasizing the writing of long, complex sentences can mislead students. As an example of misleading advice, let me cite one sentence offered as a model in a nationally disseminated writing program:

Every weekday between 7 a.m. and 4 p.m. ten young, strong hardworking carpenters from the Jones Construction Company, using many power tools as well as hand saws, wrenches, pliers, and hammers and nails, are building a new, yellow ranch house, perhaps sixty feet long and thirty-five feet wide, on a large, square lot, 100x100, at the corner of Broadway and the Boulevard, for the Harris family of Chicago, so that the family will be able to move into our community before school starts in September.

Now where would you ever find a sentence like that? Not in a short story, or a newspaper, or a letter, or a familiar essay. The only place you would find it is in a sentence-combining manual.

The other problem with sentence combining is that it ignores some important research about sentence effectiveness--about the importance of cohesive ties, about the usefulness of not placing long modifiers between the subject and predicate, about the clarity gained when the agent of an action is expressed in the subject.

Second, I believe we are over-emphasizing holistic scoring. Of course, holistic scoring is useful for making some general assessments of school and district progress, but I am at a loss to explain our obsession with this evaluation technique. There are workshops on holistic assessment, books and monographs on holistic assessment, and traveling experts on holistic assessment. I have always thought we did too much grading of essays anyway--and not enough teaching of the writing skills. An excessive concern for holistic scoring might reinforce that tendency. The other problem, of course, is that holistic scoring does not yield useful data about the specific features of student writing. How many of your students cannot control the tone of the essay? How many have trouble developing a paragraph? How many are making serious mistakes in word choice? Holistic scoring will not answer such questions. It must be supplemented with diagnostic assessment and with what I call mastery assessment, the evaluation of key features.

The fifth factor in the failure of educational change is the absence of monitoring and feedback mechanisms. Too often we implement a new writing program by holding a few inservice workshops and producing a new curriculum guide--and then assume that everything is going well. Supervisors and teachers need to work together to develop collegial

monitoring systems. I stress that those systems should be collegial in nature; experienced and competent teachers can monitor their own work, with supervisory leadership and administrative support.

Since the next two factors identified by the researchers are closely related, they can perhaps be examined together: the administrators did not develop adequate plans emphasizing short-term and long-term goals, and there was a clear absence of leadership on the part of the administration. Here I think the school principal and supervisor need to play a key role in working actively with English teachers to develop systematic plans, to monitor the implementation of those plans, and to make appropriate modifications in light of formative evaluation. Recent research on school effectiveness underscores the critical importance of the principal's leadership in curriculum and instruction. For that reason I believe it is imperative for supervisors, and their professional organizations to up-date and strengthen the leadership skills of the principal, especially as they relate to the teaching of writing. I show in figure 1 my "commandments" for principals who want better writing programs. In too many districts where new writing programs have been introduced, the involvement has been perfunctory at best. While the supervisor or administrator may consult the English teachers about the new program, in too many instances those teachers have not played an active role in determining its structure and its emphasis. And I fault my colleagues in the university for contributing to a pervasive distrust of the classroom teacher that I think lies at the heart of the problem. In article after article researchers and theoreticians ridicule the efforts of the English teacher in teaching writing. In a sense they seem to be saying something like this: "The findings of my eight-week experiment or my latest finely spun theory should carry more weight

than the accumulated wisdom of competent teacher who has taught for twenty years." Now let me make it clear that I am not advocating an anti-intellectual rejection of all research that conflicts with prevailing practice. I value the empirical knowledge produced by carefully designed studies of the composing process and the teaching of writing. But I also value the experiential knowledge of the competent classroom teacher. And when there is a conflict between those two types of knowledge, I do not want to choose sides and disparage those with whom I disagree. Instead I want to keep the question open, to explore the issue with greater subtlety, and to achieve a synthesis of empirical and experiential knowledge.

Let me illustrate with a case in point. Several studies, most notably Braddock's 1974 research, conclude that most paragraphs written by professional writers do not contain topic sentences and very few begin with the topic sentence. From this useful finding, several so-called experts in the teaching of writing leap to the conclusion that we should not teach beginning writers to use topic sentences. They then proceed to ridicule teachers and textbooks that deal with this skill. Those polemicists seem oblivious to one important research finding--and one obvious distinction. The research finding is that the presence of an initial topic sentence in a paragraph makes the paragraph clearer to the reader. (See Kieras, 1980,). The obvious distinction is that we are not teaching professional writers; we are teaching students with little understanding of the writer's craft. Instead of fulminating against classroom teachers who teach the topic sentence, researchers should examine these questions, which in my view have not been sufficiently studied:

1. Do students write clearer and longer paragraphs when

they are taught to use the topic sentence?

2. What kinds of writers seem to profit from instruction in the topic sentence--and what kinds are not helped?
3. At what point in the student writer's development can the study of the topic sentence have value?

(I have just re-read the previous pages and find to my chagrin that all the paragraphs include a topic sentence and almost all begin with one. I must be one of those hacks who never learned to hide main ideas in unfocused paragraphs.)

But let me end on a more positive note. There are some hopeful signs. The National Writing Project is making an impact because it is teacher-centered. Teachers all across the country are teaching writing in a way that gives the composing process a chance to work. In many school districts supervisors and principals are providing leadership on a continuing basis. Good textbooks are becoming available. And I believe that we can maintain our momentum by learning from the lessons of those educational innovations which have failed. Let me summarize what those lessons seem to be, presenting them as an agenda for action.

1. The principal and the supervisor provide sustained, cooperative leadership, working closely with the English teachers.
2. The team begins with a careful diagnosis of the problem, examining most carefully those aspects of the situation that are within our control: How much writing is done in other subjects? How do students use writing outside the school? How many opportunities are there for students to publish their own writing? Is there an articulated curriculum for elementary and secondary grades? What is the general level of student achievement in the English language arts? How much emphasis does the curriculum give to reasoning skills?

3. From those diagnostic data a comprehensive long-term plan for improvement is cooperatively developed by supervisors and English teachers. That comprehensive plan should provide for carefully integrated revision of the entire English curriculum, and for a comprehensive program of writing across the curriculum, even though the team may decide to begin with an emphasis on writing.

4. That comprehensive program includes only those components strongly supported by the research and specifically adapted to local needs, instead of uncritically adopting widely touted innovation.

5. The program begins with a staff development program cooperatively designed by instructional leaders and teachers, with teachers and supervisors playing an active role in planning, conducting, and evaluating the inservice sessions.

6. The district makes a commitment to provide the necessary instructional materials, and wherever possible, makes adjustments in teachers' loads.

7. With supervisory leadership, the team closely monitors the progress of the program, making continuing evaluations of teacher perceptions, student attitudes, and student achievement.

8. And most important, from beginning to end, teachers are actively involved. Their opinions are respected, their experience is valued, their strengths are used.

Such an agenda will help us escape from faddism and dogmatism by valuing the tacit knowledge of experienced teachers and supervisors by supporting them in their continued professional growth. But such a goal is a most challenging one - and to achieve it fully, we may need to change the schools and our own way of being in the world.

First, we must work together to make the schools a center of inquiry where principal, supervisor and teacher work cooperatively to study the complex teaching and learning problems that need our attention. In a sense, the school does its own research, on problems it perceives as important, using the knowledge, competence, and insight of its own staff, supported by consultant help when needed. Teams of supervisors and teachers work together to identify problems, gather data, develop solutions, implement and augment those solutions and disseminate their findings. Observe that the team does not simply adopt an ad hoc innovation and then trumpet its merits. Instead there is a rational and effective process of creative problem solving, supported by objective data gathering and analysis. Obviously such schools will need greater fiscal support - they will need funds for training, competent help, and data analysis. They will need to reduce teaching loads so that inquiry teams have the necessary time. But I believe the funds are available if our nation really gives education a top priority. And it well may be that states could use some of their block grant to support schools that wish to become inquiry centers. My guess is that the money spent to build one M-1 tank could support an inquiry team in every secondary school in Texas.

But it is even more important for us as teachers to re-think our own priorities. If we really wish to teach in a way that makes a difference, we need to provide for our own self-renewal. What do you need to be an effective teacher of writing? Obviously, you need some knowledge of techniques - but that can be obtained at conferences and workshops. But more important, you need time to read, to write, and to renew your spiritual resources. You need time to read - not educational books - but mature works of philosophy, history, anthropology, and science. You need time to write - poems, articles, stories, journals - so that you learn

at first hand the frustration and satisfaction of the writer. And you need time to renew yourself spiritually - in the depth of your being nurturing that part of the self that teaching too often stifles.

And you return to the classroom revitalized and renewed. And you reach out to those who need you. For you see, the computer can correct their spelling, increase their vocabulary, and monitor their performance.

But you can do much more. You can light their creative fires. You can awaken their sleeping minds. You can touch their lives. And that is the glory of teaching English.

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR THE PRINCIPAL WHO WANTS TO SUPPORT WRITING

1. The principal uses the language well and values the effective use of language.
2. The principal gives as much recognition to students who achieve distinction in writing as he or she gives to those who achieve distinction in sports.
3. The principal encourages, supports, and provides funds for school and classroom publications.
4. The principal holds high expectations for the language achievement of all students--and makes those expectations clear to teachers and students.
5. The principal works actively to create an orderly school environment where learning can take place.
6. The principal helps build support for the English program among parents and other community members and defends teachers against unwarranted attempts to censor.
7. The principal visits English classes often and focuses his or her observations on the critical aspects of instruction and learning.
8. The principal provides for a comprehensive assessment program and does not rely unduly on standardized test scores.
9. The principal understands the need for and supports a comprehensive English curriculum.
10. The principal protects the English classroom from unwarranted intrusions.

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